

## Teaching

### Promoting Effective Teaching and Valuing Each Teacher

Since the early 1970s, articles, books, and workshops have increasingly advocated that principals become instructional and educational leaders (Duke, 1987). Many of these claim that principals have been overly caught up solely in the management of schools. They argue that principals, instead, should be more directly involved in setting instructional priorities and shaping the quality of teaching and learning. The assumption is that it is the principal's responsibility to shape the school's instructional program.

Easier said than done, we say! Inserting yourself into the instructional realm of your school means changing some basic norms, ones that have always been present in American schools. Teachers teach; principals manage. Teachers think: I'm the best judge of what my students need; I am the certified, trained professional in the classroom. My plate is full to overflowing with lesson plans, kids, duties, parents, and you want me to take more time for supervision and for curriculum evaluation and planning. Principals think: I should be in classrooms more, but it takes so much time and energy to observe teachers and staff and to work with them in their professional growth. How can I know what's best for the students in all cases? How can I tell what's good teaching and what isn't in all the grades and subjects in my school?

These daunting questions challenge principals every day. We believe principals must be intimately involved in the instructional life of their schools. Through that involvement, they can

provide the leadership essential to the school's success as a learning center. But we know few, if any, principals who do not feel deep tensions from trying to be involved in the work of their teachers and students. The persisting question we raise in this chapter is not whether or not the principal should be involved, but *how might the principal appropriately be involved in teacher's business, which has for so long been private, specialized, and often very personal?*

Principal Carl Wesley's retrospective journal about Melissa Conroy's performance gives us a frank glimpse of one principal's struggle with this question. Carl wrote this during the late summer preceding his fourth year at Edgewood Middle School, a school of 674 students and 43 teachers. Carl's school and his staff have made major strides toward the middle school concept. But recently they have experienced a wave of questions about their effectiveness. These questions have been fueled by the excellence movement, by legislated student outcomes, and by calls for accountability. Carl feels responsible for the quality of learning at Edgewood. In this light, he has harbored questions about Melissa from the time he arrived as principal. The following journal entries resulted from a colleague suggesting that, if he truly wanted to see Melissa improve, Carl should reconstruct the history of his evaluations of her "for the record."

From the Retrospective Journal of Carl Wesley:

Teachers, parents, school board members, and even students are finding it easier and easier to question the quality of our teachers. This makes it harder and harder for me to evaluate teachers. For the past two years, I've been working intensively with Melissa Conroy, a seventeen-year veteran at this school. Since I arrived four years ago, I've had questions about how good she is. I've observed a lot of her classes, have gotten to know many of her students and some of their parents. The problem is that, as I've become increasingly certain in

my own mind that she's not a very strong teacher, I've also learned that quite a few others around here think she's doing fine.

Here is my synopsis:

### Year One

When I look back, I see that I had doubts about Melissa's performance from the start. Well, maybe not from the start, but darn close. Three-and-a-half years ago, when I first visited Melissa's seventh-grade language arts classroom, my first reaction was relief. The class was orderly, the kids well behaved and busily at work. Melissa was walking the aisles, reading over shoulders, and offering quiet suggestions. Any new principal hopes to find that most teachers at least have things under control. I didn't want any hot spots that would require me to parachute in with my bag of disciplinary tricks.

It took me the whole first year to discover what was going on in Edgewood's classrooms. With everything else I was doing for the first time at Edgewood, I really couldn't get into each teacher's classroom much. Therefore, I couldn't have enough direct access to what and how they taught to form valid impressions, much less conclusions. By the end of my first year, Melissa sort of blended into my map of the whole faculty, fitting somewhere in the middle, appearing competent and solid but not a high flyer.

I suppose that's significant, in retrospect. She didn't stand out for me. I didn't see any special energy, initiative, or colorfulness. She didn't volunteer for schoolwide activities or speak up much. Perhaps subconsciously, this influenced the way I thought about her. I consider myself a career educator, and I've always set high standards for myself. I spend a lot of time at work and enjoy doing things with kids and teachers. I think I apply these same expectations to the teachers I work with. When teachers don't meet these expectations, I question their commitment, dedication, and productivity. I don't

conclude that they are bad teachers, mind you; I just put them in the “not outstanding” category.

### Year Two

The following fall, I observed teachers in a more structured way. I use a clinical supervision approach. I like Glathorn's *Differentiated Supervision* (1984) philosophy but base my evaluation system on both preconferences with a teacher that build shared observation goals and postobservation conferences in which we exchange viewpoints on how it went and set goals for improvement. At that time, I asked Melissa in a preconference how she planned to engage the kids in her lesson, which was on subject-verb agreement. She seemed startled by the question. From her response, I started thinking that engagement was not a primary factor in her approach to teaching.

Over the course of the year, I observed her classes three times. Each time, I saw the same basic lesson: Melissa gave short instructional segments to the whole class, as students listened and took notes (though only about 40 percent did so). She interspersed six to eight questions to individual students throughout her twenty-minute or so presentation, then assigned exercises related to the presentation. While the students worked on these, she either walked the aisles or corrected papers at her desk (once these were homework papers handed in at the start of the period). Two of the classes involved reading short stories; the third, grammar. In the literature classes, she spent the last ten minutes on open discussion of the questions they had been working on at their seats.

I wasn't excited about these classes. Neither were the students. But try as I might in the postconferences, I couldn't put my finger on what Melissa needed to work on. I raised the issue of student engagement. Her position was that they were very engaged in listening to her and working on her assignments. I couldn't disagree. I inquired how well the kids were learning what she expected them

to—thinking that some probably weren't doing too well because they were bored to tears. She said they were doing about as well as most classes—some A work, a lot of B work, and some borderline work as expected. She was proud that her grades always looked like a perfect bell curve. Her position was that the kids just come that way in these average groups. When I asked why the “low-end” kids were failing, suggesting their boredom and lack of engagement may be factors, she said something like, “I try as hard as I can with them, but they just end up quitting on me.”

By the end of the year, it was clear that she was no more excited about teaching these kids than I was about her teaching. But I didn't really know what to do about it. Though Melissa wasn't teaching the way I wanted her to, she wasn't a disaster either. She was good enough. My formal evaluation at the end of the year said nothing very enthusiastic, but it wasn't very critical either. I simply didn't have enough hard data to substantiate my gut instinct. I suggested she talk to several other teachers about using cooperative learning techniques to engage kids more. I don't think she did anything though.

### Year Three

Last year, my third at Edgewood, several things changed that had an effect on my approach to Melissa. First, I started a staff development committee that ran a series of workshops devoted to teaching the middle school student. My belief that the kids must be engaged actively in learning, using all their senses through multi-modal teaching and learning activities, was reinforced. About half the faculty, not including Melissa, adopted these ideas. Many of them began working in pairs and trios, sharing ideas.

Second, the school board, in response to public criticisms of our schools, held a series of hearings on outcome-based education. Most teachers objected to these, but a small group including Melissa supported the position taken by several board members

that schools needed to do a better job of holding kids accountable for their learning.

Third, the administrative team, along with a committee of teachers appointed by the teachers' association, developed a new handbook for teacher supervision and evaluation. The new evaluation criteria, though still vague, included teacher responsibility for making their teaching stimulating and engaging.

I started noticing some changes in Melissa. She was cloistering herself with a few other teachers. As some teachers informally teamed up and began using more cooperative learning strategies and other techniques, the others grew colder. They stopped having coffee with the teachers who enhanced the middle school approach and weren't as affable at staff gatherings. Melissa appeared to be a central player in this nonparticipant group, who became increasingly critical of what the more energetic and forward-thinking teachers were doing.

My observations of Melissa's teaching didn't help. I found her classrooms more traditional and duller than before. She rarely varied the lesson structure, relied heavily on seat work, insisted on grading kids strictly by "what they produce," as she put it, and made little effort to extend herself to kids having difficulty. In our conferences, I tried repeatedly to explain to her what we've learned about activity-centered teaching and how it gives all students—the highly motivated, the not-so-able, the sleepy, the rebellious—an equal chance to learn. She usually listened agreeably, nodded, but never fully concurred with my approach.

Things deteriorated when I wrote out her summative evaluation in March based on four observations between October and March. It was the first she'd received using the new evaluation system predicated on a middle school teaching philosophy. It gave me a chance to explain to Melissa that her teaching was not engaging the kids. I made three basic points, referring to them as areas of challenge for her:

1. Her failure to vary her lesson structure and teaching methods was handicapping the children who need to be stimulated through active engagement.
2. Her failure to address the needs of poorly performing students through new approaches was condemning them to little if any learning for the entire year.
3. Her reliance on seat work and homework meant that every child was, for all intents and purposes, learning on his or her own without supervision or guided practice.

The evaluation included some commendations for her classroom order and steady attention to management details.

When Melissa read the conclusions about her teaching, she went into a deep funk. I didn't see her for six days, as she withdrew into her room. I got word that she was deeply hurt. She seemed to be avoiding me. At the May faculty meeting, she sat off to the side with a few others and didn't make eye contact. I asked her to drop by the next day after school for a chat. I told her, "You don't seem to be yourself." She said she had an appointment right after school, so she couldn't.

### How Things Stand Now

It's taken until now, the summer after my third year, to conclude that I have to do something about Melissa. It's eating away at me, making me dread the beginning of school. My failure with her has really affected me. And now it's bigger than just her. There's obvious resistance to my initiatives not only from her but from others in the non-participants group. They're only five of our faculty, but they're enough of a group to make my attempts to build a team even more difficult. Brenda, one of our middle school leaders, told me that Melissa and the other nonparticipants felt my new initiatives were destroying the school.

I feel as if I'm running a school with destructive forces in it. I mean destructive for kids too! I'm feeling very unsure about how to deal with them the way things are now.

Carl's story is all too typical in our experience, not only with beginning principals but often with veterans. He has developed an opinion about the quality of Melissa's teaching, but the demands of his job have prevented him from thoroughly documenting it or doing anything about it. Carl has contributed to the situation because he felt ill-equipped to judge Melissa's performance in a defensible manner. He avoided the inevitable conflict that would result from confronting her. Over time, he has become more convinced that Melissa is not what Edgewood teachers should be; yet, he has felt less and less able to bring her into—or put her out of—the fold.

How can principals address staff members whose performance does not match their own high expectations without creating hostility and disaffection? How do you respectfully, even supportively, critique a teacher to help him or her improve? Most principals live with this dilemma in some form: the coach who has a winning record but emotionally abuses kids every day at practice; the high school teacher who seldom gives adequate feedback to kids on their written work; the counselor who spends most of her day in her office with the door shut, talking to the same few students while others cannot get help; the janitor who does just enough to get by. We invite you to listen in as we present a couple of different approaches to Carl's situation. We suspect that you will find the seeds of your own strategy in them.

Dear Richard,

I feel as if I've been exactly where Carl is. He's trying to move the school toward improvement by taking the professional high road, but he's also inundated trying to run the school at the same time.

Carl has some great things going at Edgewood, but he's gotten them going at the expense of his supervision of teachers like Melissa.

In a way, I think he's neglected his responsibility to assure that all his teachers are as effective as they can be. With Melissa, the evidence has been mounting that she's not a strong teacher and that she won't respond to his diplomatic requests for improvement. To Carl's credit, he hasn't been ignoring this evidence. The problem is that he hasn't been paying enough attention to it, so he can't confidently conclude that she's either a good teacher or a poor teacher.

Carl needs to do *something* because the current situation is becoming more and more negative for the kids, for Melissa, and for Carl's relationship with the nonparticipants. As long as he's uncertain about her performance, Carl cannot and should not confront her with serious allegations of incompetence. Such mistakes always backfire and can cause deep distrust. Instead, Carl must take a hopeful and positive approach with Melissa. Until proven otherwise, he's got to believe that she wants to improve and that she can improve.

Carl needs to approach Melissa more honestly than he has so far. His goal is to find her developmental level, so he can address her needs appropriately (Glickman, 1992). He should devote time and energy to working with her through the fall with the goal of giving her the best opportunity to show that she wants to improve and will commit energy and time to that improvement. He should be as direct and as nonthreatening as possible. He should emphasize her right to explore ways to change and improve her teaching that are comfortable for her. Carl's support of her efforts should be unequivocal—as long as she does something to address his concerns about her performance.

This is a tough thing to pull off, requiring lots of interpersonal skills, because Carl knows Melissa is on the defensive to start with (Levine, 1989, speaks to this). He needs to extend himself to her.

I'd call her before the summer is out and invite her to talk informally about her goals for the year. He should be frank about the growing gap between them as professionals and should invite her to be honest about her feelings toward her teaching, the school and its direction, and about him and his evaluations of her performance. He should come clean that he has doubts about her performance as a teacher and add that he wants to work more closely and openly with her to resolve these doubts. Carl should express confidence in Melissa's ability to grow professionally, and he should end the conference by identifying some goals they can work on together during the fall.

Through the fall, Carl and Melissa should meet every two weeks or so to establish a professional dialogue about what teachers need to do to be successful. As much as possible, discussions should focus on specific events and on Melissa's teaching techniques. Carl should not pass judgment on these. The point is for the two of them to explore together whether these practices are beneficial for Melissa's students. Based on this, they should be able to come to some agreement about what, if anything, needs improvement. If that doesn't happen, they will at least be clear about differences in their values and their assessments of Melissa's performance.

Throughout these conversations, Carl needs to be as supportive as he can of Melissa and to encourage her to share some of her own aspirations for improving her teaching. He should offer her professional development (without necessarily compromising his own goals for her). He should strive for a level of authenticity in their relationship that allows her to express her doubts, anxieties, and even her anger at being forced into changing. While Carl is expressing his concern that she can teach more effectively, he must not write her off. He must keep a positive, noncombative attitude. In a nutshell, I am proposing that Carl give Melissa a healthy chance to show that she is willing to improve her teaching and the quality of learning for her students.

I somewhat hesitantly add a final suggestion: Carl should informally document their meetings for the purpose of being clear about their agreements concerning Melissa's performance and progress and having a record of his assistance to her. This could take the form of memos "for our eyes only" after each session. Melissa could be encouraged to include her own reflections. I am hesitant about this because documentation of this kind could drive their relationship from so-so to terrible. But up to this point, Carl has not done a good job in this arena. There's no record from Year One. There are evaluations from Year Two, but the district's evaluation criteria were vague and the summative report is positive for the most part. In Year Three, the evaluation system changed, and for the first time Melissa's performance showed up with some warts. Recently, communication between them has almost ceased, leaving a case to be made by Melissa that Carl has closed the book on her already. If done well, their memos can help both Carl and Melissa stay focused on a few central questions about her teaching and make clear their agreements—even if they're agreements to disagree. If the fall turns out to confirm Carl's doubts about Melissa, the documentation stands as an above-board record of Melissa's disinterest in improvement and/or her inability to progress.

In sum, my suggestion to Carl is to be honest in his evaluation of her work as well as in his sincerity in supporting her attempts to improve. He must appeal to her professional pride and self-respect to convince her to make an effort to improve. If she does not make that effort, Carl cannot and should not continue to abide Melissa as a member of Edgewood's faculty.

Gordy

Dear Gordy,

How many chances do you give a teacher? As I read Carl's three years with Melissa, he has well nigh closed the book on her! Why

pusseyfoot around with more teacher-centered conferences? Hasn't Carl given her adequate notice that she needs to improve? Hasn't she proven that she's not willing to? In fact, it seems she's gone even further by cloistering herself with like-minded colleagues and distancing herself from Carl.

My approach to Melissa would be a lot more hard-nosed and, in a way, more honest than yours. Here's how I see the situation. When Carl came to Edgewood, he didn't feel confident about his ability to judge effective teaching. On top of that, he was inundated by all the busy-ness of the principalship and being new. Unable to determine accurately whether her teaching was average or below average in the first year, he nevertheless felt she was not a very strong teacher. In Year Two, he observed Melissa and saw some things he considered undesirable in a middle school teacher (she didn't engage kids and gave them busy work). But in Year Two, Carl was using an evaluation system that didn't help him address these weaknesses with Melissa and, I think, he still lacked the confidence to approach her directly. So another year went by, and he was left with a growing sense of frustration: "She wasn't any more excited about teaching these kids than I was about her!" he wrote.

Now, at the end of Year Three, Carl sounds as though he's come into his own. Most of Edgewood Middle School's faculty are excited about the middle school concept; there's stronger consensus about how teachers should teach, and there's even a new evaluation process in place. Not only is the school moving, but the "stuck" teachers are starting to stick out (Johnson, 1990). In your letter, you seem to suggest that he back off from the evaluations he's already done. I suggest the opposite. He was specific about Melissa's performance in the March summative evaluation. I think he should now insist on a program of improvement with a very tight time frame (McGreal, 1983; Stanley and Popham, 1988). Melissa's had seventeen years to make herself the superlative professional Carl wants in his school and who we'd all want teaching our kids. She needs to get on with it or get out.

Carl should prepare a series of suggestions regarding the three areas he cited in Melissa's March evaluation, and he should set up a conference with her the second week of school. In the conference, he should refer to that evaluation and those three points and ask Melissa what goals she has set for herself to make improvements in these areas. Before the meeting is over, or perhaps at the next meeting, Carl should present his suggestions for reaching these goals and clearly indicate his plan to conference-observe-conference with her monthly, focusing on these goals and any other issues that arise. These meetings should be followed by a written summary of the plan to be signed by both Carl and Melissa.

I think Carl's hardest task will be to confront Melissa with this plan and then to follow through on it during the year. He sounds intellectually certain about Melissa's weaknesses as a teacher, but he doesn't sound so interpersonally or politically confident. I would be sure to speak with the superintendent or personnel director to be certain that central office was prepared to support a confrontation over performance (many are not!). I would also seek among my friends or professional associates some advice on handling the feelings that will arise. Melissa is likely to fight this strategy and might very well include her support group and the teachers' association and maybe even supporters in the community. Conflict, anger, hostility, and personal/professional verbal assault could be directed at Carl. He should prepare his own support system to help him get through this without completely depleting his emotional energies.

I recommend this approach because I think it's more expeditious and more honest than the one you suggest in your letter. Carl seems convinced that Melissa's performance is hampering kids' learning and starting to divide the faculty. He needs to make this very clear to her and give her an honest chance to engage in improvement. He cannot go on, as you suggest, hoping that Melissa sees the light and writes a professional improvement plan for herself. Carl needs to get his act together—and have her get

her act together by next spring. If she doesn't, he will have two-plus years of documentation of weak teaching and should move to dismissal.

Richard

### Some Paths Through the Thicket

Studies of principals and the principalship have consistently shown that the tide of administrative events in schools engulfs even well-intentioned principals like Carl, leaving them few opportunities for instructional supervision, evaluation, and leadership (McGreal, 1983). Carl's story and Gordy's and Richard's letters reveal just how complex this challenge can be, drawing not only on principals' technical knowledge but also on their interpersonal skills and personal courage. We next explore some approaches to the question raised in this chapter: how can principals address issues of performance with staff members while also supporting and respecting them personally?

One thing seems clear to us: the principal must first commit to the goal of instructional effectiveness for every teacher. Carl believes that good teaching is important, and he wants Melissa to be a good teacher. He believes he has an obligation to be involved in teachers' business and to help Melissa be a good teacher. Research on principals demonstrates that this type of significant commitment makes a real difference to the quality of instruction in a school (Smith and Andrews, 1989).

Beyond making this philosophical commitment, however, the principal will face a host of how-to questions: what does it mean for Carl to help Melissa be a better teacher? Does Melissa even want help? What exactly is the nature of a helping relationship? Gordy's letter advocates helping Melissa in a direct yet nonthreatening way. Carl should help her explore and feel comfortable about change. His support should be unequivocal—as long as she addresses his

concerns about her performance. Richard's letter suggests a more hard-nosed approach, asserting that Melissa must improve her teaching . . . or else, that she needs to get on with it or get out.

These two positions seem quite different at first. Gordy's approach stresses collaboration and the importance of both parties investing and trusting in the process. Carl needs to salvage his supervisory relationship with Melissa. He must provide the opportunity for both of them to come to terms with his concerns about her performance. Richard's letter emphasizes Melissa's responsibility to maximize her teaching effectiveness. Melissa seems to have neglected her professional obligation by ignoring Carl's three-year effort to discuss her effectiveness. Richard's letter takes the position that Melissa has rejected Carl's help. She must now sink or swim on her own.

In another light, these two approaches are really not so far apart. Gordy and Richard both accept Carl's premise that helping Melissa to change means *change or else*. They all believe a principal can legitimately decide how and if a teacher will perform her teaching duties. This is the essence of evaluation versus supervision. Central to supervision is the sharing of professional improvement between supervisor and supervisee; it assumes equality in their roles and collaboration in their efforts (Saphier, 1993; Glickman, 1992). Evaluation usually means one person makes judgments about the work of another. This creates an unequal relationship. Teachers often lose autonomy and feel less safe than they do either on their own or in a supervisory relationship (Stanley and Popham, 1988; Duke, 1987).

In both cases the principal is making decisions about the teacher based on observations. Although Gordy suggests that Melissa be given a chance to join in this decision-making authority, it's on Carl's terms, not Melissa's. Richard states that Carl should address Melissa's apparent mediocrity by drawing a line in the sand immediately. In both cases, Melissa has less authority and autonomy because Carl assumes he must assert control over her work.